

## Schiller's Preface to *The Robbers*

Consider this play no more than a dramatic narrative which, catching the soul in its most secret operations, makes use of the stage, while neither limiting itself to the rules of drama nor coveting the dubious rewards available to writers of theater adaptations. It would be absurd, as I think you will agree, to try to develop three extraordinary human beings fully within three hours—figures whose actions depend on the turning of perhaps a thousand little wheels—just as in real life it is impossible for even the most penetrating intellect to provide a complete analysis of three extraordinary human beings even within twenty-four hours. Writing this play meant dealing with an abundance of interwoven realities that I could not fit within the all-too-narrow rules of Aristotle and Batteux.\*

Yet what will keep it from the stage is not so much this abundance as its content. The overall economy of the piece made it necessary to present several characters who offend the finer feelings of virtue and offend our delicate manners. This is a position in which every painter of human beings is put whenever the aim is to produce a copy of the real world, and not merely textbook characters with idealistic affectations. It just so happens that in this world good is eclipsed by evil—and virtue, when contrasted with vice, takes on the most lively colors. Whoever takes on the task of toppling vice and avenging religion, morality, and civil laws on its enemies must unveil vice in its naked horror and place it before the eye of humanity in its full proportions. And that person must personally wander through those dark labyrinths and force himself to experience feelings whose perversity causes him to bristle.

Here vice is unfolded together with all its inner workings. In

\*Charles Batteux (1713–80), author of *Traité des beaux-arts réduits à un seul principe* (The fine arts reduced to a single principle, 1747).



Franz, vice dissolves intricate terrors of conscience into powerless abstractions, reduces higher sentiments to a skeleton, and mocks away the grave voice of religion. For a person who, like Franz, has gone so far in refining his understanding at the expense of his heart (a notoriety we do not envy), the most holy is no longer holy; humanity and heaven amount to nothing in his eyes. I have attempted to sketch an accurate likeness of such a miscreant, laying out the entire mechanism of his vice and putting its power to the test. The public will have to judge to what extent I succeed in this task; I believe I have copied nature true to life.

Next to Franz stands another figure, one who will put many of my readers in an awkward position: a spirit who finds the worst vice attractive only because of its monumental stature, only because of the power (*Kraft*) that it demands, only because of the dangers that accompany it. He is a striking, serious human being, armed with every power, who could become either a Brutus or a Catiline, depending how that power was wielded. Unfortunate circumstances decide for the latter, and not until this man's monstrous straying is over does he arrive at the former. Erroneous attitudes toward activity and power, and a plenitude of energy that overflows all law had, of course, to come to nothing as it shattered against civil society. To his enthusiastic dreams of the monumental and the efficacious there needed only to be added a bitterness toward the unideal world—thus was born the strange Don Quixote who, in Robber Moor, we hate and love, admire and lament. I hope I do not have to point out that this portrait is no more a warning only to robbers than the satire of Don Quixote is a warning only to knights-errant.

These days it is in such good taste to exercise one's sarcasm at the expense of religion that it is practically impossible to pass for a genius without deriding its most sacred truths. In daily assemblies of the so-called wits, the noble simplicity of the holy scripture is mishandled and made to look ridiculous. Yet what is so holy and serious that, when one twists it around, it cannot be made fun of? I hope to have provided religion and morality no small revenge in depicting these malicious despisers of the holy scripture in the form of my most abominable robbers.

But there is more. These immoral characters also had to shine in certain respects, even win from the perspective of the spirit what they lose from the perspective of the heart. Here I did no more than



copy nature verbatim. Every person, even the most wicked, is made to a certain extent in God's image, and it might even be that the greater villain has a shorter path to righteousness than the lesser. For morality keeps even pace with one's powers: the greater one's capabilities, the greater and more monstrous are one's errors—and the more blameworthy is the misuse of those powers.

Klopstock's Adramelech\* inspires a feeling in us in which admiration is blended with disgust; we follow Milton's Satan with shuddering awe through pathless chaos; the Medea of the ancient stage remains, for all her atrocities, a great and wondrous woman; and certainly we admire Shakespeare's Richard as much as a literary figure as we would hate him in reality. If it is my task to depict whole human beings, then I have to include their strong points, which are never lacking even in the most evil of people. If I want to provide a warning against tigers, then I cannot forget to mention their dazzling, spotted coats so that the animals are not overlooked. At any rate, the human being who is completely evil is simply not a proper subject of art, repelling rather than attracting interest: the reader would simply turn the page. A noble soul can no more put up with uninterrupted moral dissonance than with the scratching of a knife on glass.

Precisely for these reasons I am probably ill-advised to bring my play to the stage. A certain strength of mind is needed both on the part of the writer and the reader: the former must be careful not to glorify vice; the latter must not be so captivated by some attractive aspect of that vice that its essential ugliness goes unrecognized. Others will have to judge my own role in this; I am not entirely sure about my readers. The vulgar—and here I mean not just street sweepers—strike root (just between us) all over, and unfortunately they set the tone. Too nearsighted to take in the whole picture I present, too small-minded to understand its importance, too spiteful to allow me a moral aim, that person will, I fear, thwart my intentions and perhaps even see in my work an apology for the vice that I topple—all making the poor poet, to which one is willing to grant everything except justice, pay the penalty for the stupidity of others.

\*A devil in Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's biblical epic *Der Messias* (The Messiah, 1751–73).



Once again it is the old story of Democritus and the Abderans,\* and to rid us of this nuisance our good Hippocrates would use up whole plantations of hellebore. As many friends of the truth as you like might stand up and instruct their fellow citizens from the pulpit and the stage; still, the vulgar will never cease to be vulgar, even if the sun and the moon changed course, and heaven and earth went out of style like a dress. Perhaps, for the sake of the weak of heart, I should have been less true to nature. But if that beetle with which we are all familiar can extract manure from pearls, and if it has been shown that fire burns and water drowns, should pearls and fire and water all be confiscated?

In light of its remarkable dénouement, I can rightfully claim for my drama a place among moral books; vice leads to the outcome it deserves. The one who strayed is back on the track of the law. Virtue goes away victorious. Those who are fair to me and read my work through with the desire to understand, from such readers I expect not that they will admire the poet, but that they will esteem my honesty and righteousness.

*Translated by Alan C. Leidner*

\*Abdera, a Greek city on the coast of Thrace, was the birthplace of Democritus. Reference is to a tale told by Christoph Martin Wieland in his novel *Die Abderiten, eine sehr wahrscheinliche Geschichte* (The history of the Abderites, 1744–80, excerpted in The German Library volume 10) in which Hippocrates, asked by the proverbially simpleminded Abderans to cure Democritus, whom they thought deranged because they could not understand him, prescribes a concoction made of hellebore to the entire city.